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Opening extract from

Brightling

Written by

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Published by

Hot Key Books

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First published in Great Britain in 2014 by Hot Key Books
Northburgh House, 10 Northburgh Street, London EC1V 0AT

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4714-0057-5

This book is typeset in 11pt Sabon using Atomik ePublisher

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc



Hot Key Books supports the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading international forest certification organisation, and is committed to printing only on Greenpeace-approved FSC-certified paper.

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Hot Key Books is part of the Bonnier Publishing Group
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Sparrow

'I can't find him! I *must* find him!' Sparrow cried, looking around wildly.

She ducked under Mr Pynch's outstretched, grabbing arm and raced past him towards the stone stairs.

'Come here!' Mr Pynch roared.

'Where is he?' Sparrow cried, racing up the stairs two at a time. 'I can't go without saying goodbye! I can't!'

In the hall below, the other orphanage girls watched her anxiously.

Miss Knip was standing on the landing blocking her way. She tapped her cane against her palm. 'Sparrow, you have one minute to leave this establishment.' She pointed to the clock high up on the wall. It was nearly six. 'One minute!'

'You'd better go.' One of the girls took Sparrow's hand gently. 'It's now or never.'

Little Jean took her other hand and they guided her back down the stairs.

‘You’ve no choice,’ Mary whispered.

‘None,’ Little Jean added.

‘But Scaramouch . . .’ Sparrow said, pulling away from them.

Mr Pynch was holding the big black door open. Before she knew it, Sparrow was being helped out. She was on the doorstep. She was outside.

‘Goodbye, dear Sparrow!’ she heard Mary call, before the heavy door slammed shut behind her.

‘And good riddance!’ Miss Knip’s voice trilled sharply from behind it. She rammed the long iron bolts into their sockets as though she had a grudge against them.

‘Go and boil your heads!’ Sparrow muttered, then loudly, ‘Go and boil your horrible old heads!’ And, picking up her bag, she thundered down the path.

The gatekeeper shuffled out of his cosy little room to meet her.

‘Sparrow, are you really leaving us?’ He looked up at the sky. ‘It’s not long until dark, lassie,’ he said. ‘Are you sure you want to go now?’

Sparrow nodded. ‘I’ve no choice, Barton. You know the rules. I’m an evening babe. Come at six o’clock, must leave at six – and if I don’t, I stay for ever.’

Barton nodded. ‘You wouldn’t want that.’

Sparrow looked up at the bleak building and its unlit windows. Each room housed a cold, empty grate, curtainless windows, and hard, bone-bruising furniture. ‘I wouldn’t want that,’ she echoed.

‘Which way are you going, Sparrow?’ Barton asked.

‘Towards Dragon Mountain, to Stollenback. I have to!’ she added, as Barton scowled. ‘Don’t look at me like that. I know it’s dangerous, but, Barton, what else can I do?’

‘Aye, well, both ways is as bad as the other . . .’ Barton sniffed. He took a heavy key from a chain on his belt and slid it into the lock on the big, wrought-iron gate. It turned with a well-oiled click. ‘Sorry to see you go,’ he muttered, pushing the gate open.

‘Miss Knip won’t be sorry to see the back of me.’

‘Or the back of that cat, that Scaramouch . . . But surely you’re taking him?’ he added, looking round for the cat.

‘Oh, don’t!’ she cried, her voice catching. ‘I never said goodbye. I couldn’t find him. I’ll miss him so badly.’

Scaramouch was Sparrow’s shadow.

He was a cat; a big cat. He stood as tall as her knees. His fur was short and the colour of barley or dry grass. Tawny-coloured stripes, running down his back and wrapping round his legs were just visible if you looked closely. When the light changed, his fur changed colour too. Sometimes it was the colour of mink, gleaming light gold and even silver. The tips of his ears and tail were tinted dark chocolate and his beautiful eyes were rimmed with black. His paws were like small padded plates.

Sparrow saved him titbits from her own meagre meals. She combed burrs from his fur and knew how to rub the bridge of his nose just the way he loved until he fell into a daze. Even though Miss Knip tried to keep him out of the dormitory, he slept on her bed every night.

Barton swung open the gate a little wider and peered at

the gloomy trees looming around the orphanage. 'I don't like to let you out into this,' he said. 'Hey, Sparrow, why not sleep here? I don't mind sleeping in the stable with Horace –' He stopped abruptly. '*Knip!*' he said, pointing to an upper window of the Knip and Pynch Home for Waifs and Strays.

Miss Knip was staring down at them with an expression of malevolence. She waved her hand in a shooing action, as if Sparrow were a stray dog.

Suddenly the unmistakable silhouette of Scaramouch appeared on the windowsill beside her.

'Oh! There he is!' Sparrow cried.

Scaramouch looked fixedly down at Sparrow with his yellow, saucer eyes. His tail twitched angrily.

'Knip has him! The old witch!' Sparrow said. 'I hate her! Dear puss, dear, dear Scaramouch . . . Goodbye . . .' She waved at him weakly.

'Old bat,' Barton muttered. 'Here, lass,' he added and thrust a bottle into her hand. 'Take this. It's not much, but . . .' Sparrow shook the bottle of pink-coloured liquid. 'Pop-pear juice,' he said. 'Gives you strength. Helps you see in the dark.'

She grinned and stowed the bottle in her bag along with the pop-apples and lumps of bread and cheese wrapped up in her special shawl. 'Thanks, Barton.'

'And Sparrow, if you ever come across any of that Brightling stuff, send some back for me, hey?' He rubbed his bent back. 'It'd mend this back of mine, I'm sure.'

Sparrow nodded. She didn't know what Brightling was,

only that it had a reputation for curing every ailment under the sun. 'I will.'

She went out through the gates and headed down the path.

Scaramouch, dear Scaramouch, she thought. Miss Knip must have had him locked up in her room all the time. How typical of the evil old bat! She hadn't had a chance to give him a last stroke and hear his deep, wonderful purr. To think she'd never see him again . . . it was terrible!

She took a deep breath – here it was, the start of her new life. Stollenback. A large town, far away at the foot of Dragon Mountain.

The name *Dragon Mountain* conjured up fairy-tales and times of mystery and danger – but she'd heard that there weren't any dragons on the mountain these days, only some sort of school or academy.

She was heading to Stollenback because although most baby girls brought to the orphanage came with nothing – no name, no clothes except perhaps a scrap of blanket – Sparrow had arrived wrapped up in a fine, white shawl. The maker's name, *Sampson's of Stollenback* was woven into one corner of the square. It was all she had to go on. She didn't expect to find her parents – they wouldn't have left her at the orphanage if they'd wanted her – but maybe someone in Stollenback would know something about her true identity. Maybe someone there would be kind and give her work and a place to live. She had no other reason to go anywhere in the world.

If she went in the opposite direction, north, she would have passed the Bleek and Barr Home for orphaned boys and come eventually to Nollenback, and trolls lived there.

Sparrow swung her bag over her shoulder and dug her hands into the pockets of her small jacket, which pulled tightly across her shoulders. It wasn't long since she'd made herself the thick wool jacket and already it was too small for her.

Where the lane rounded a corner, she stopped and looked back for a final sight of the Knip and Pynch Home. She was too late; it had already disappeared behind the trees.

Now she was alone, really and truly. She jutted out her chin and squared her shoulders. She began to whistle softly. She hoped if she hurried she'd reach somewhere safe before total darkness fell because she had no tinderbox, no light of any sort.

The path soon brought her out of the trees and into open land with scrubby thorn bushes and tall cactus plants. She felt better here, having a wider, broader view, and as she walked she swung her arms and looked from side to side. Wild things lived here; the orphans had heard them crying and barking at night.

She walked for a long time and her feet began to hurt. Although she was used to hard work, she wasn't used to walking and her boots were rubbing against her heels. At the top of the next rise in the track her heart lifted and she suddenly felt brighter and stronger. She was free of the orphanage; all she had to do was head towards that mountain . . . If only she had Scaramouch with her. How could she ever, ever live without him?

She set off again down the steep path and into the valley below, telling herself that now she was eleven she didn't need a cat. She didn't need anyone.

Then she came to the marshes.

Squelchy bogs of weed and mud stretched for miles and miles. There were two problems here, she knew – she could fall in, or something could jump out.

Dead trees stood up from the marsh like weird, black, cardboard cut-outs; it was hard to believe that they had ever lived. They were ironwoods, their wood so hard that even when they died they stayed standing for years and years. Once Mr Pynch had given out blocks of ironwood in carpentry class. After a week of trying to make a cut in it, they gave up. Only Mr Pynch thought it was funny.

Sparrow paused, ate a pop-apple from her bag and then went on, carefully picking her way along the narrow, raised paths that crossed the marshes.

The dusky sky was now purple and grey and pink; the sun was still showing above the distant hills but it would tip over the edge any moment now. She sped up, telling herself that it would be all right and nothing would get her. Then she heard the first splash and slither beside her in the water. She stopped dead and looked over to where the noise had come from. Something long and dark and fast slipped between the reeds. She saw a row of horny ribs along its back and a long tail flick and slap the water, then it was gone.

A krackodyle.

She threw the pop-apple core in its direction and ran.

Krackodyles can run too, but she was determined to run faster and to run for ever if she had to. 'I'm faster than you, you old scabby thing!' she cried.

The marshes seemed endless. She ran and ran, only stopping when she had to, to draw breath and look around again. Now there were rustling and slithering noises from all directions. She looked left and right and saw the bending reeds and whirling muddy water as krackodyles weaved their way purposefully through the swamp towards her.

She swallowed; took a deep breath, and ran again. It was getting darker, objects were becoming less distinct, and she couldn't run like this for ever, no matter what.

Suddenly she tripped.

She came crashing down on the path and rolled right to the edge of the bog – one hand in the foul water. She screamed, snatched it back before anything could snap at it, got to her knees and stayed there, breathing heavily.

They were there, the krackodyles; they were everywhere. She could hear them creeping in closer. There were five or six of them, because everywhere she looked the black water stirred and rippled. There was the slap of a tail and there, the blink of red eyes, watching her.

Sparrow slowly got to her feet. She had the strength for one last burst, she thought, one last effort. She would rather die running than have the krackodyles come and get her while she sat.

Her feet throbbed and burned in her boots. Her heart boomed and thundered in her chest; she could barely stand, let alone run, but run she must.

She steadied herself, took one step forward . . . immediately something rose up from the water beside her in a shower of stinking mud. She saw snapping jaws and the inside of a

large, pink mouth and so many teeth and then, just as she thought it would get her, just as she thought she was dead, there was a piercing cry, the most terrible, heart-stopping cry she'd ever heard. A mink-coloured ball of fur rocketed past her and flew through the air, locking itself over the krackodyle's head. The ball yowled again. It had a tail and claws, and the claws were in the krackodyle's eyes, gouging and scratching.

The krackodyle roared in pain. One of its eyes was gone; its skin was ripped and torn. It grunted and roared, thrashing from side to side. It flung the thing from its face and splattered backwards into the swamp.

Sparrow was safe.